

Trimming tradition



Lauren E. VanSteenvoort, assistant project manager/marketing coordinator, attaches snowflakes to the ceiling at Muhlenberg Greene Architects Ltd., Wyomissing. The staff makes the paper decorations every year, and has done so for 30 of them.

Here's how Muhlenberg Greene Architects' Snowflake Day endured for 30 years.

BY MICHELLE N. LYNCH
READING EAGLE

Thousands of snowflakes fill the air, swirling and winking over workstations, conference tables and computers at Muhlenberg Greene Architects Ltd.

"It snowed in here," Debra J. Condrath said as she ushered clients through the front door of the architectural firm's Wyomissing headquarters.

The snowflakes, actually lacy paper cutouts hung from the ceiling, are in no danger of melting in the cozy warmth of the office at 955 Berkshire Blvd. Earlier this month, Condrath, 59, who is office manager, and

the dozen or so staff members celebrated what the firm calls "Snowflake Day." It's the day the architects and support staff set aside their work to transform the office into a winter wonderland.

"The tradition is about 30 years old," said Howard Quaintance, principal emeritus. "Many of the snowflakes date from the original event."

His title means he is retired, Quaintance, 75, of Mount Penn said, but that did not keep him and Larry Greene, 84, of Zionsville, also a principal emeritus, from coming back to work for a day of decorating.

The dizzying display grew from the boredom of architects

Magdalena "Dale" M. Johnson, 56, of Rockland Township, and Dennis W. Rex, 65, of South Heidelberg Township.

"We were a little slow one year," Johnson recalled, "Dennis suggested making snowflakes, and we just started decorating the front of the old office."

The firm was on North Sixth Street in Reading then, and the tradition endured through two moves.

Each year the staff snips new flakes to add to the collection, which Condrath of Reading estimates at more than 2,500. The fragile paper cuttings are stored flat between the pages of old telephone books — five books full — each holding 500 or more snowflakes.

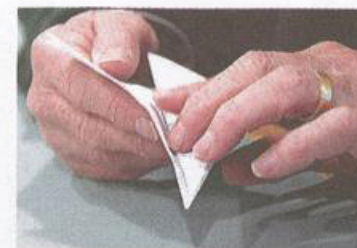
Some of the older snowflakes have yellowed, Quaintance

pointed out.

"And we have some black ones, too," he said, noting these are hung over the workstation of the sole office smoker as encouragement to quit the habit.

The staff worked from simple designs to more intricate and elaborate creations as their skills advanced with the years, Johnson said, noting that some patterns were found online, but many are original.

About three years ago, Lauren E. VanSteenvoort, 34, assistant project manager and marketing coordinator, decided staff and retirees should show off their skills with an annual design contest. This year's masterpieces include cutouts with repeating silhouettes of lobsters, butterflies and the arching crown at the top of New York's famed Chrysler building.



Howard Quaintance, principal emeritus, unfolds the snowflake he created. It features trees and stars. The company's snowflake-making tradition started during a slow year and just kept going.

There also is a ballerina with a lacy snowflake tutu.

"That one is pushing it," Quaintance said. "Occasionally, we have to remind people that snowflakes only have six sides."

Real snowflakes are formed by ice crystal molecules joining in a hexagonal structure, he explained, adding that no two are alike, unlike some of the paper flakes, which have duplicates.

Quaintance made the smallest last year from a rectangle of 3-by-5-inch notepaper.

"I was in a hotel room," he said. "That was the only paper I had."

VanSteenvoort of Elverson insisted she had to submit a design to the contest even though he was out of town.

"I clipped it, took a photo with my cellphone and sent it to her," she said.

Clients and vendors look

forward to the annual display and often stop in just to see it, Condrath said. The public is welcome to pop in, too. The fanciful cutouts will twirl from the ceiling through most of winter. But by the end of February, the staff will start taking them down, Condrath said, and that is not as much fun as putting them up.

"It is depressing when we take them down," Johnson said.

But she is certain there will be even more next winter and that the tradition will continue.

Clients and others can vote for their favorite of the dozen contest entries by visiting the firm's office or Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=muhlenberg%20greene%20architects>. ■

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